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AIARU: Panel 1 - Undergraduate Education and the Research University

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**Academic Innovation and the American Research University
Symposium**

University of California, Merced
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Panel #1: Undergraduate Education and Research University

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**UC MERCED
FORMER ACTING
CHANCELLOR,
RODERIC PARK,
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I'm Rod Park and it's a pleasure to be here and to initiate this first set of discussions. The topic today about the relationship of undergraduate instruction to the functioning of a research university is not a new one. My introduction occurred 45 years ago when I was a young Turk at Berkeley. I was asked in response to the free speech movement which was questioning all our values and our teaching and the kinds of subjects we had and the constraints on political expression, to join a committee called the Muscatine Committee which was to assess whether we were using our resources in the best way for undergraduate education and giving the the social needs of the day.

What was the best way to teach these undergraduates? Should we focus more on problems and how to solve them? Should we integrate scientific inquiry into the more human, humanistic and philosophical questions, the ones such as, "Who am I?," "What should I do?," "What should I know?," "What is the role of the university outside the classroom?"

So we spent six months considering this then produced a report called, *Education at Berkeley*, which we presented to the Academic Senate and it made some few small changes.

There's a view in the university that there's only one reason for doing something, the rest of the reasons for doing nothing, as you well know. And we got a few changes for experimentation but not a great deal more.

Now, 45 years later, we're facing another kind of a crisis, not a social one this time but more of a budgetary one. And, again, we are back addressing the same question.

Now a university has two kinds of problems. There's a fairly small group of problems we can actually solve. Not many, but we can design a building, we can put a department in it, we can finish the building, we can occupy it. That's one example.

But the second group of problems, such as the content of the curriculum or how best to teach students has no final answers. And we always solve these problems in the context of the human times given the needs of the students, the resources of the university, and the expectations and the needs of the larger society.

And what our panel is discussing briefly this morning is an example of the second class of problems: how to best to teach undergraduates given our resources, our educational objectives, and society's needs. And I'll add one other, which is an elephant in the room that we don't discuss very often, which is the reward system for faculty advancement in a research university, which one can argue has been drifting away from being compatible with undergraduate instruction as traditionally conceived.

Now, 45 years ago, we came up with an idea about this, and it was rejected, not because it was a bad idea, but because it faced political and financial barriers that seemed insurmountable at the time. And our argument looked like this.

Research universities are expensive. Increasing specialization of research in graduate programs and the facilities required to support them may be an unsustainable expense if the university continues to expand in proportion to our population increase. Rather than continually expanding a research university, perhaps we should consider increasing our efficiency by expanding upper division relative to lower division, thereby producing more bachelor degrees with the same facilities and the same teaching resources because the number of bachelor degrees we give, of course, is proportional to students in upper division, not proportional to the student body as a whole.

This would allow our increasingly specialized faculty members to do what they do best: teach specialized courses to declared majors. And there's no doubt in my mind that over the years, given the faculty members I've worked with, they've emerged from increasingly specialized programs, they become increasingly specialized themselves, and when asked to teach general education, there's a real question whether they have enough general education themselves to be able to do that effectively. Another elephant in the room.

If one did this, community colleges would have to expand their transfer programs, and during this transition, as we implemented this new plan for higher education. This increase in the ratio of upper division to lower division reminds me of the planning dictum: it is easier to take a step in the right direction when you know exactly where you're going. And I think this is a step to be considered this time; one can argue about where it's going to

end and what the consequences are.

But what are the objections?--I'll go through some here--an alumni concern of the news that one of the top ones, hardly a vital one, but what will happen with the football program if we don't have as many freshmen and sophomores?

But, much more important, I think the freshman year is a time when students bond with each other and with the university. We have never developed, at least at Berkeley, in my experience, an equivalent experience for transfer students. And will more transfers in place of freshmen reduce the eventual fund created raising potentials of our student body as they leave without having had that bonding experience?

An important matter for the future, and maybe we have to consider doing what I understand Texas A and M does, where they have a camp for the transfer students who come in. All participate in the bonding with the university. Maybe we should do more of that.

The faculty concern is that community college transfers will not be as well prepared as our native students who enroll as freshmen. Actually, during my tenure at Berkeley, the GPAs of transfer students after their first semester were indistinguishable from our native students who entered Berkeley directly from high school. So there was this, this period of adjustment, but after that they did very well.

Another faculty concern is how will we support our graduate students in social sciences and humanities with fewer TA-ships at the lower division. That hardly seems to be, maybe it's got a budgetary reality to it, but hardly an academically sound notion of what we should be doing, and maybe these TAs can help in upper division, also.

Next, student credit hours are very cheaply produced in lower division, because regular ladder faculty participation is comparatively low and is picked up by lecturers, TAs, and associates. And perhaps, if we are going to go ahead with this issue of student credit hour formulas used by the state for upper and lower division must be confronted head on with the notion that we're going to increase efficiency, we're going to produce more degrees with the same facility, and may cost a little bit more in the process of doing that but the degree output will be greater.

Assuming continued reduced state funding is inevitable and increased revenue from out-of-state enrollment is politically uncertain, we cannot sit on our hands. And I like here a quote from the art historian Robert Byron who said, "Misfortune comes to the complacent, brought not by some moral law but because complacence is the parent of incompetence."

The extent that this financial crisis refocuses our engagement on the perennial challenges of the second kind in the university, this symposium will have succeeded. Thank you.